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ABSTRACT

In Chicago, local school councils (LSCs) with a majority of elected parent and community members, exercise substantial school-level decision making powers. They hire their school principals on performance contracts, set priorities for school improvement, and determine school budgets. This report summarizes two 1997 studies that analyzed LSC effectiveness. Overall, parent and community LSC members are substantially better educated than the average Illinois adult. The typical LSC meets monthly and nearly always has a quorum. About 50-60 percent of LSCs are high functioning, 25-33 percent are performing well with support, and 10-15 percent have serious inadequacies. Most LSCs are viable governance organizations that responsibly complete their mandated duties. Very few LSC members use their office to engage in corrupt activity. Needed actions include intervening to rebuild dysfunctional LSCs; strengthen LSCs that meet all their responsibilities but are not catalysts for significant educational improvement; and strengthen LSCs to help improve Chicago's high schools. LSCs must act to stop central office staff from interfering inappropriately in LSC decision making. The current process for educating and assisting LSCs violates widely recognized standards for effective adult education, so an infrastructure is needed independent of the school system's central office to provide high quality education and assistance to LSCs on a large scale. (SM)

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# Chicago's Local School Councils

## What the Research Says

Local School Council members discuss principal evaluation in an eight-week Designs for Change course: "Parent and Community Leadership for School Improvement."

**Designs for Change**

January 2002

For more research and information about Chicago school reform, including resources for principal evaluation and selection by Local School Councils, visit Designs for Change's website.

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## For More Information

This report was prepared primarily by Donald R. Moore of Designs for Change, with the assistance of Gail Merritt. Of course, the summaries of various research studies are the responsibility of Designs for Change and not the authors of the studies that are reviewed. Two studies that are summarized in depth can be obtained through the following sources: *LSCs — Local Leadership at Work* online at www.consortium-chicago.org, and *What Makes These Schools Stand Out: Chicago Elementary Schools with a Seven-Year Trend of Improved Reading Achievement* online at www.designsforchange.org.

Additional resources for Local School Councils, including assistance in principal evaluation and selection, are available through the Designs for Change website.

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## Report Summary

In Chicago, Local School Councils (LSCs) with a majority of elected parent and community members exercise **substantial school-level decision making powers**, based on a state law passed in 1988. They hire their school's principal on a four-year performance contract, set priorities for school improvement, and determine the school's budget.

Based on a **decade of research** about these LSCs, judgments about their effectiveness can be based on **hard evidence**, rather than opinion and stereotypes.

### Documented Strengths of Chicago's LSCs

Research about LSCs provides encouraging verification of the viability and effectiveness of the clear majority of Chicago's LSCs. For example:

- Parent and community LSC members are **substantially better educated** than the average adult resident of Illinois.
- The typical LSC meets monthly and nearly always has a quorum. The average parent or community LSC member devotes **28 hours per month** to helping their school.
- The Consortium on Chicago School Research carried out a detailed study of how a cross-section of LSCs carried out their key responsibilities. The researchers concluded that **50%-60%** were high functioning, **25%-33%** were performing well but need support, and **10%-15%** had serious inadequacies.
- The Consortium study concluded that "the vast majority of LSCs are viable governance organizations that responsibly carry out their mandated duties...we view the findings presented here as largely validating the wisdom of the 1988 reform act."
- In a city notorious for corruption, all objective evidence points to the fact that **very few** LSC members use their office to engage in **corrupt activity**.

### Overcoming Weaknesses and Expecting More

Given the level of accomplishment of Chicago's LSCs, the key issue is not whether LSCs should exist, **but how all LSCs can meet the standards** attained by the best ones.

Problems that must be addressed include:

- Intervening effectively to rebuild the 10%-15% of LSCs that are dysfunctional. Even if a new LSC or another drastic change is needed (based on a **fair independent** investigation), the long-range objective must be to help create a **viable independent LSC** that will lead the school effectively — rather than to establish long-term central control.
- Significantly strengthening those LSCs that meet all their responsibilities but are **not catalysts** for significant educational improvement.
- Strengthening LSCs as one critical part of an overall strategy to improve Chicago's **high schools**, which have thus far failed to improve significantly.
- Increasing the focus of all LSCs on making specific changes focused on improving the **quality of teaching and learning**.

### Making Excellence a Reality

To build on the strengths of Chicago's LSCs and overcome weaknesses, those committed to excellent Chicago schools must take major actions to change the ways in which LSCs are currently **treated and educated**:

- Central office staff continue to interfere inappropriately in LSC decision making, often pursuing their own political agendas. LSCs and their supporters need to act to **stop these abuses** and to create an oversight process for LSCs that **solves problems and builds LSC capacity**.
- The current process for educating and assisting LSCs **violates widely recognized standards** for effective adult education. An infrastructure must be put in place independent of the school system's central office to provide high quality education and assistance to LSCs on a **large scale**.

*The key issue is not whether LSCs with strong decision making authority should exist, but how all LSCs can meet the standards attained by the best ones.*



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*"The 1988 Chicago school reform act represents the most radical attempt to restructuring an urban school system in the last hundred years."*

*—Historian Michael Katz*

## Research Should Guide the Debate About Chicago's Local School Councils

In 1988, the Illinois General Assembly created Chicago's Local School Councils — elected decision-making councils that have significant power, at each of Chicago's 550 public schools. These 550 Local School Councils (LSCs) joined such other elected Illinois decision makers as the state's **900** local school boards and **2,700** city, town, and township councils.[1] Indeed, Illinois has more elected units of local government than **any other state** in the country.[2]

Thus, the idea of local control of schools and municipalities is widely accepted across Illinois, outside the Chicago city limits. Yet grassroots democracy inside Chicago (in the form of the city's Local School Councils) has sparked **widespread interest and controversy** — for at least two reasons.

First, Chicago school reform has attracted attention because shifting authority for key decisions to elected school-level councils is **unprecedented in a major urban school district**. As education historian Michael Katz commented:

> The 1988 Chicago school reform law represents the most radical attempt to restructure an urban school system in the last hundred years. For most of the twentieth century, reforms rearranged the furniture in big city school systems; Chicago's 1988 school reform moved the walls. It redefined the governance of schools, the conditions of teaching and learning, and the relations of schools to their various communities.[3]

Supporters of this major reform argued that creating Local School Councils (one of several major changes brought about by the Chicago School Reform Act) would help catalyze substantial improvements in the quality of Chicago public education.[4]

A second major reason that Chicago reform has received special scrutiny is that many have **expressed skepticism** that elected Chicago parents and community members in many of Chicago's neighborhoods have the capacity to provide the leadership needed to improve their children's schools. For example, one school reform critic said that creating Local School Councils was like "turning the asylum over to the lunatics."

Given that there are more than 550 LSCs, opinions about the effectiveness of LSCs have varied, and those with different opinions can cite specific school situations to support their views that LSCs are effective or ineffective.

Chicago's first Local School Councils were elected eleven years ago, and researchers have now conducted a number of studies of LSC effectiveness. This research, which **uncovers overall patterns** across 550 schools, should be the **critical basis** for reaching conclusions about how well Chicago's dramatic restructuring effort has worked.

This report summarizes the **findings from two major studies** that analyze the effectiveness of LSCs:

- Susan Ryan, Anthony Bryk, et al. (December 1997). **Charting Reform: LSCs — Local Leadership at Work.** Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.[5] This is the most comprehensive study of the nature and activities of LSCs, based on a systemwide survey of parent, community, principal, and teacher LSC members in a representative sample of schools.
- Designs for Change (October 1997). **What Makes These Schools Stand Out: Chicago Elementary Schools With a Seven-Year Trend of Improved Reading Achievement.** Chicago: Author.[6] This study analyzes the practices of elementary schools that substantially improved reading achievement from 1990 to 1997 — including the issue of whether these successful schools have more effective Local School Councils.

This report also briefly reviews some **additional evidence** that bears on current policy issues related to Local School Councils.



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In the Interpretive Summary that ends the report, we draw conclusions about key public policy issues concerning Chicago's Local School Councils based on existing research.

## Original Framework and Rationale for Chicago's Local School Councils

Chicago's Local School Councils were created through the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988. This state law rewrote Article 34 of the Illinois School Code, the portion of state law that deals **only with** Chicago's public schools.

In 1995, the state legislature modified the Reform Act to give Chicago's mayor more control over Chicago's Central Board and central administration as well as the power to intervene in failing schools. National publications like *Newsweek* have asserted that Chicago's mayor was given "near total power over the schools" by the 1995 legislative changes.[3] This assertion is untrue. The **basic powers** of Chicago's Local School Councils have **remained intact** to the present, and Chicago remains the most decentralized big city school system in the nation.

### Composition and Authority

One of the central changes made by the 1988 law was to establish an elected Local School Council at each Chicago public school (except for a few special schools). Each LSC consists of:

- Six parent representatives, elected by parents and community residents.
- Two community representatives, elected by parents and community residents.
- Two teachers, elected by the school staff.
- The school's principal.
- A student elected by students (in the high schools).

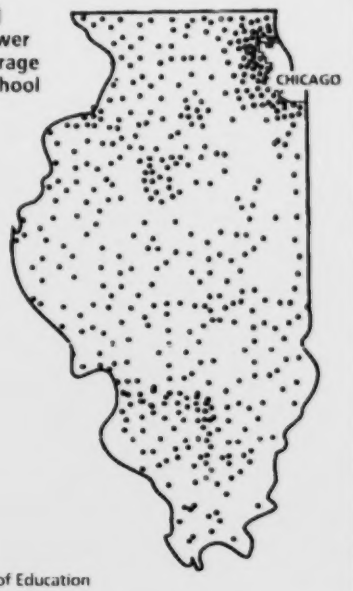
Unique among U.S. cities, Chicago's LSCs were **given strong powers,** including powers in the following areas:

- **Principal Selection and Evaluation.** LSCs appoint the school's principal to a four-year contract and rehire or replace the principal at the end of this contract period. And they supervise and evaluate the principal on an ongoing basis.
- **School Improvement Planning.** LSCs set priorities for their school's improvement through helping develop and approve an annual school improvement plan. These plans must focus on achieving student learning standards set by the state.
- **School-Based Budget.** LSCs help develop and approve a school budget, with major control over an average of $500,000 per year in flexible funds from the state.

It is important to note that the Chicago School Reform Act made numerous other important changes besides establishing Local School Councils — such as giving principals the authority to appoint teachers to open positions without regard to teacher seniority and eliminating lifetime principal tenure.[4]

*More than 550 Illinois school boards head school districts that enroll fewer students than the average Chicago high school.*

**TABLE 1. Illinois School Districts that Enroll Fewer Students than the Average Chicago Public High School**




**Source:** Illinois State Board of Education



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The history of the reform movement that brought about these changes has been described in some detail in two historical accounts.[9]

## Rationale for Local School Councils

There were three key reasons advanced in 1988 for creating Local School Councils as a part of a comprehensive reform effort.

*Research indicates that school-site councils that are granted only limited authority have little impact.*

**Modeled on Illinois School Boards.** Statewide, school districts in Illinois are led by nearly 900 local school boards. More than 550 of these school boards head school districts that enroll fewer students than the average Chicago public high school. As Table 1 on page 3 indicates, many of these small school districts are located just a few miles outside the Chicago city limits.

National research indicates that, controlling for student background, students in small school districts achieve better than students in large districts, and this is especially true for low-income students.[10]

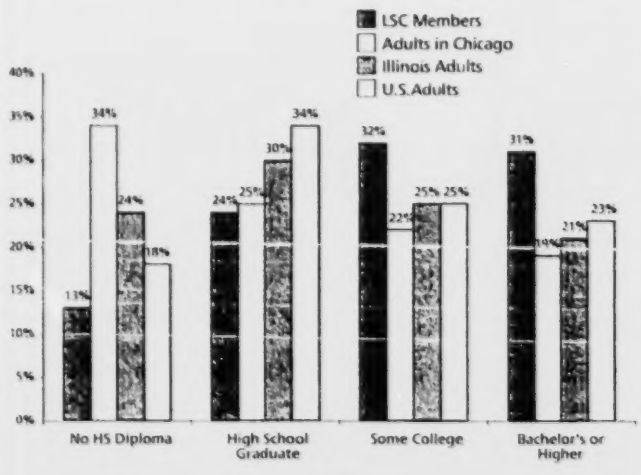
**Breaking Up a Rigid Bureaucracy and Creating Local Initiative.** Advocates for the Chicago School Reform Act argued that the rigid bureaucracy of the school system had failed to improve student performance and had stifled educational improvement. They argued that shifting real authority to local schools and communities would catalyze improvement.[11]

They further argued that since the resistance to change was often as strong among many principals and school staff as at the top of the system, LSCs should have a majority of elected parents and community members. (Of course, the 900 school boards across Illinois are composed entirely of elected parents and community members, and educators employed by the school district are legally barred from serving on them.)

**Need for Real Power at the School Level.** Advocates for Chicago's reform act were aware that other big city school districts (like New York City and Detroit) had been broken down into smaller subdistricts, but that these subdistricts remain among the **largest school districts** in the nation. (For example, New York City's Community School Districts serve an average of 25,000 students.) Chicago reformers were also aware that the restructuring in New York City and Detroit had had limited impact on the quality of education.[12]

Chicago reform advocates were also aware that many other urban school districts had created school-site councils but had given them **little or no authority.** Research evidence indicated that these weak councils accomplished little.[13] Chicago reform was unique among big-city reforms in **shifting major authority** to school-site councils.

**TABLE 2. LSC Parents and Community Representatives Are Relatively Well Educated**




**Source:** Consortium on Chicago School Research and U.S. Census Bureau

## Findings from "LSCs — Local Leadership at Work" (Consortium on Chicago School Research)

**LSCs — Local Leadership at Work** by the Consortium on Chicago School Research was based on survey responses from a representative cross-section of Local School Councils, including their parent,

community, teacher, and principal members.[14] To preview the major conclusion reached as a result of this research:

- The vast majority of LSCs are **viable governance organizations that responsibly carry out their mandated duties** and are active in building school and community partnerships. The initial worries that councils would infringe on professional autonomy have proved unfounded...we view the findings presented here as **largely validating the wisdom of the 1988 Reform Act**. By devolving significant resources and authority to local school communities and by expanding opportunities for local participation by parents, community members, and staff, this reform has enlarged the capabilities of communities to solve local problems.[emphasis added][15]

Below, we summarize some major findings of the Consortium study; specific page references appear in the Endnotes.

## LSC Members' Educational Levels

The researchers conclude that "LSC parents and community representatives are relatively well-educated."[16] As Table 2 on page 4 indicates:

- 31% of parent and community LSC members hold a bachelor's degree, 32% have completed some college, and only 13% lack a high school degree.
- The average Chicago LSC parent and community member is **better educated** than the average adult in the United States (or in Illinois).[17] For example, **63%** of Chicago's parent and community LSC members hold a bachelor's degree or have completed some college, compared with **46%** of Illinois adults.

## LSC Members' Race and Ethnicity

As indicated by Table 3, Chicago's LSC members closely **reflect the racial composition of the city:**

- 42% of LSC members are African American, compared with 38% of the Chicago population.
- 14% of LSC members are Latino, compared with 20% of the Chicago population.
- 40% of LSC members are white, compared with 38% of the Chicago population.

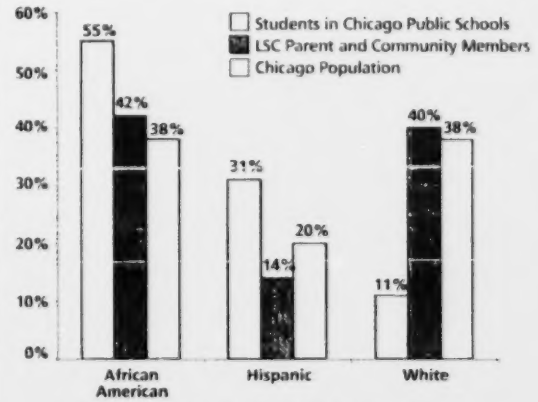
However, as Table 3 also indicates, there is a lower percentage of African American and Latino LSC members, compared with the school system's student enrollment, and a higher percentage of white LSC members, compared with the school system's student enrollment.

Chicago's LSCs represent a major opportunity for **African American and Latino** grassroots leaders to serve their communities as **elected public officials:**

- About **1,800** African American parents and community residents and **700** Latino parents serve on Chicago's LSCs.[18]
- These African American and Latino LSC members represent the vast majority of elected minority officials in Illinois.
- There are **4,500** African American members on all the school boards in the United States,[19] compared with **1,800**

*The average Chicago parent or community LSC member is substantially better educated than the average Illinois resident.*

**TABLE 3. Race and Ethnicity of Students, LSC Members, and the Chicago Population**




**Source**: Consortium on Chicago School Research





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African American parent and community LSC members in Chicago.

- There are **1,400** Latino members on all the school boards in the United States,[20] compared with **700** Latino parent and community LSC members in Chicago.
- According to the Consortium study, LSC involvement has helped members acquire "valuable civic skills, including organization, budgeting, listening to others, and the ability to work in groups."[21]

*The average parent or community LSC member spends 28 hours per month involved in aiding their school.*

## Level of LSC Activity

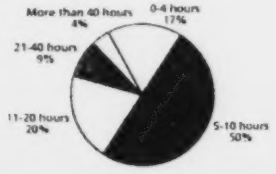
When LSCs were established, many critics were skeptical that they would continue to function over the long-term. However, the Consortium research indicates that:

- 88% of LSCs meet **at least nine times** a year.
- 56% of LSCs have **a quorum** at all meetings and an additional 35% have a quorum at all but one or two meetings.
- 81% of LSCs have two or more active committees. 27% have more than six active committees.[22]

LSC members make a **major time commitment** in working to improve their school. As Table 4 indicates:

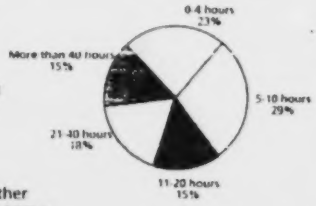
**TABLE 4. Hours per Month LSC Members Spend on Official Duties**
**Parents and Community Representatives**

Average = **11 hours** per month




**Hours per Month LSC Members Spend in School Beyond Regular LSC Work**
**Parents and Community Representatives**

Average = **17 hours** per month




**Note**: These hours reflect time spent in other meetings, school events, volunteering, and P.T.A.

**Source**: Consortium on Chicago School Reform. Average hours computed by Designs for Change.

- The average LSC member spends **11 hours** per month on **official duties**.
- The average LSC member spends **17 hours** per month **volunteering** in the school, beyond their regular LSC work.
- Thus, across the school system, parent and community LSC members volunteer about **120,000 hours** per month in assisting their schools.

## Cross-Checking the Accuracy of LSC Reports about Their Effectiveness

The Consortium survey asked LSC members to rate their own effectiveness in carrying out their key responsibilities in: principal evaluation and selection, school improvement planning, and budget planning. One issue that the researchers scrutinized was whether the LSC members who responded were **inflating their answers.** However, the research team concluded that this was **not a significant problem,** for several reasons:

- LSC members were asked detailed questions about whether they carried out **particular actions** (such as checking the resumes of principal candidates or holding a community forum to gain input on the school improvement plan). They were not simply asked to gauge their overall effectiveness on a broad issue.
- Within schools, there was a **high level of consistency** between the responses of parents and community representatives, on the one hand, and teachers and principals, on the other.
- There was a strong correlation between the responses of LSC members on this survey and a separate study two years earlier in which **teachers** had rated the effectiveness of the LSC at their school.[23]

## Principal Evaluation

LSCs were asked detailed questions about whether they had carried out specific steps in principal evaluation that would reflect a thorough evaluation process. In response, the following percentages of LSC members





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**strongly agreed or agreed** with such statements as the following:

- "Our LSC has a clear set of criteria to evaluate the principal." (**86%** of the LSC members strongly agreed or agreed, and **74%** of principals strongly agreed or agreed.)
- "Our LSC has a formal process and timeline for evaluating the principal." (**82%** of LSC members strongly agreed or agreed, and **74%** of principals strongly agreed or agreed.)
- "Our evaluation helped the principal make changes." (**74%** of LSC members strongly agreed or agreed, and **56%** of principals strongly agreed or agreed.)[24]

Based on ratings for six such statements about principal evaluation, the Consortium judged that the following percentages of LSCs deserved one of four quality ratings:

- **18%** carried out a very comprehensive evaluation (i.e., the LSC members **strongly agreed with all six statements** about principal evaluation).
- **38%** carried out a comprehensive evaluation.
- **32%** carried out a minimal evaluation.
- **12%** carried out no evaluation.[25]

## Principal Selection

In carrying out principal selection, the study indicated that a high percentage of LSCs took steps that reflected a **thorough selection process**. For example:

- 84% checked candidate references.
- 81% interviewed several candidates.
- 75% contacted other members of the school community for input.
- 68% presented final candidates at a community forum.[26]

Further evidence about the role of LSCs in principal selection is discussed on page 12.

## School Improvement Planning

LSCs were asked detailed questions about whether LSCs carried out specific steps in school improvement planning that would reflect a thorough planning process. In response, the following percentages of LSC members strongly agreed or agreed with statements like the following:

- "The LSC monitors the SIP on a regular basis." (**76%** of the LSC members strongly agreed or agreed.)
- "We held a community forum for SIP input." (**61%** of LSC members strongly agreed or agreed.)[27]

Based on ratings for six statements about school improvement planning, the Consortium judged that the following percentages of LSCs deserved one of four quality ratings:

- **14%** were very active in developing and monitoring the school improvement plan (i.e., the LSC **strongly agreed with all six statements** about school improvement planning).
- **41%** were active.
- **35%** somewhat active.
- **10%** were inactive.[28]

## School-Based Budgeting

LSCs were asked detailed questions about whether LSCs carried out specific steps in school-based budgeting that would reflect a thorough budgeting process. In response, the following percentages of LSC members strongly agreed or agreed with statements like the following:

- "Our LSC gets plenty of time to review/improve the budget." (**73%** of LSC members strongly agreed or agreed.)
- "I can explain the technical details of the budget." (**58%** of LSC members strongly agreed or agreed.)[29]

Based on ratings for statements about school budgeting, the Consortium judged that the following percentages of LSCs deserved one of four quality ratings:

- **22%** were highly involved in approving and monitoring the school budget (i.e., the LSC **strongly agreed with all statements** about their involvement in school-based budgeting).
- **58%** were moderately involved.

[] **16%** were minimally involved.

[] **4%** were uninvolved.[10]

## Other LSC Contributions

In addition to their effectiveness in carrying out their key legally-mandated responsibilities, the Consortium found evidence that a significant portion of LSCs had aided the school through their efforts in the following areas:

[] Helping **create collaborations** with local agencies and institutions.[11]

[] Pressing for **improved academic programs.**[12]

[] Securing **improved facilities.**[13]

[] Increasing **parent involvement.**[13]

[] Personally **volunteering** in the school.[15]

*"The vast majority of LSCs are viable governance organizations that responsibly carry out their mandated duties..."*
*—Consortium on Chicago School Research*

## Elementary Versus High School LSCs

Studies have consistently found more effective educational practices and better results in Chicago elementary schools, as compared with high schools.[16] Thus, it is logical to investigate whether there were differences **between elementary and high school LSCs.** The researchers summarize their conclusions about these differences as follows:

[] Elementary school council members offer somewhat more positive reports about their operations and contributions to the school. This occurs despite the fact that high school councils have higher education levels of their members, have a more extensive subcommittee structure, and meet more often. [][17]

## Problem Councils

The researchers found serious problems in 10% to 15% of LSCs:

[] **4%** of LSCs were basically **inactive,** while another **13%** showed evidence of **serious inconsistencies** in carrying out their basic responsibilities.

[] **12%** of LSCs had two or more members who reported excessive **sustained conflict.**

[] **5%** of LSCs had two or more members who reported **unethical behavior.**[18]

The issue of LSC corruption is discussed further on page 14.

The Consortium researchers identified some **common characteristics** of LSCs experiencing problems. Some common characteristics of problem LSCs were:

[] Weak leadership from the principal and/or LSC chair.

[] Less training.

[] Weak knowledge and skills in such areas as running effective meetings and new educational practices.[19]

The researchers found **no differences** among the most productive and least productive LSCs in their **educational or occupational levels.**[20]

## Overall Effectiveness

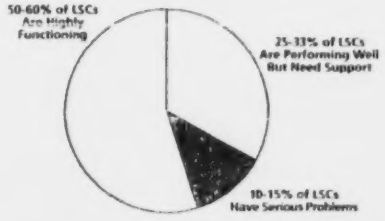
The researchers **combined their indicators** of the competence of LSCs in carrying out their key responsibilities to arrive at an **overall rating** of the effectiveness of each LSC. As shown in Table 5:

[] 50% to 60% of LSCs were found to be **"highly functioning."**

[] 25% to 33% were found to be **"performing well but need support."**

[] 10% to 15% had **"serious problems,"** ranging from inactivity to sustained conflict to unethical behavior.[21]

**TABLE 5. Consortium Ratings of Overall LSC Effectiveness**


50-60% of LSCs Are Highly Functioning
25-33% of LSCs Are Performing Well But Need Support
10-15% of LSCs Have Serious Problems

**Source:** Consortium on Chicago School Research



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Summarizing the study's key conclusion, the researchers write:

[] The vast majority of LSCs are viable governance organizations that responsibly carry out their mandated duties and are active in building school and community partnerships. The initial worries that councils would infringe on professional autonomy have proved unfounded....we view the findings presented here as largely validating the wisdom of the 1988 Reform Act. By devolving significant resources and authority to local school communities and by expanding opportunities for local participation by parents, community members, and staff, this reform has enlarged the capabilities of communities to solve local problems.[][42]

The implications of the Consortium study's findings are discussed on pages 16-18, in light of other research findings described below.

## Findings from "What Makes These Schools Stand Out" (Designs for Change)

While the Consortium's study of Local School Councils (as summarized above) provides systematic insights about the effectiveness of Local School Councils in carrying out their key responsibilities, the Consortium's study did not analyze whether schools with more effective Local School Councils were **more likely to improve student achievement.** As described below, a Designs for Change study (which focused on elementary schools) found that elementary schools that improved reading achievement substantially from 1990 to 1997 were **significantly more likely to have effective Local School Councils**, as rated by the school's teachers.

### Key Study Results

The Designs for Change study drew both on data from the Consortium on Chicago School Research about the practices of individual schools and on student achievement data provided by the Chicago Public Schools (Designs for Change, **What Makes These Schools Stand Out: Chicago Elementary Schools with a Seven-Year Trend of Improved Reading Achievement**).[43]

The study focused on two groups of schools that were low-achieving on the Iowa Reading Test in 1990 but showed different reading achievement score patterns between 1990 and 1997 (see Table 6):

[] **"No Trend Schools,"** which were low-achieving in 1990 and did not show a substantial trend of improved achievement by 1997. In 1990, 17% of the students in No Trend Schools were reading at or above the national average, while by 1997, only 20% of their students were at or above the national average.

[] **"Substantially Up Schools,"** which were low-achieving in 1990, but showed a substantial trend of improved reading achievement by 1997. In 1990, 23% of

*Elementary schools that improved reading achievement substantially between 1990 and 1997 were significantly more likely to have effective LSCs.*

**TABLE 6. Percent of Chicago Elementary Students At or Above the National Norm (1990-1997)**

**Source**: Designs for Change

9

# TABLE 7.
# What Makes Schools with Substantially Improved Reading Achievement Stand Out?

**Elementary schools that had low reading achievement in 1990, but then showed a substantial pattern of improvement, were rated significantly higher by the students and staff on each of the Indicators of their practices described below.**
**= less than .05 level (statistically significant)  = less than .10 level (merits further study)**

## 1. School Leadership

**Local School Council Contribution.** Teachers rated the LSC more highly in having contributed to improving various aspects of the school's educational program and environment.

**Principal as Instructional Leader.** The principal was rated more highly as setting a vision for the school, involving people in decision making, and insisting on high standards for staff performance.

**Principal Supervision.** Principals were more likely to closely supervise the change process — for example, through a regular presence in classrooms.

**Teacher Influence on Decision Making.** Teachers reported more influence on decisions about instruction and about school-wide issues.

## 2. Parent-Community Partnerships

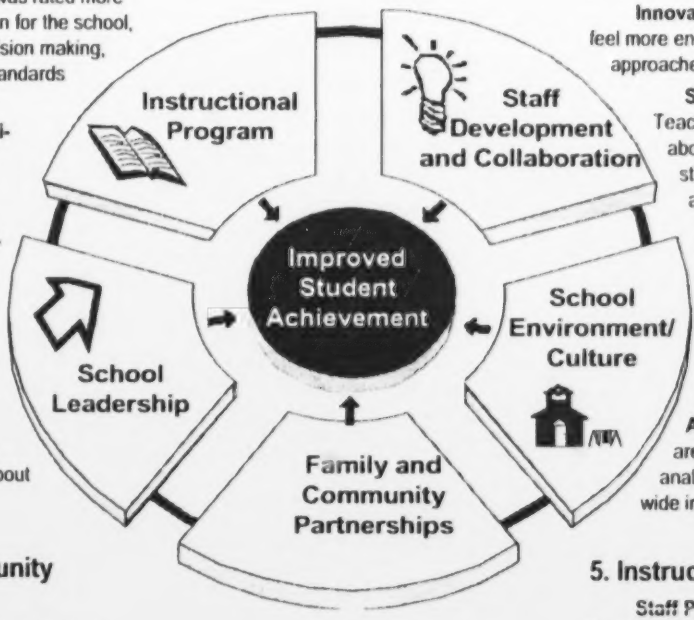
**Teacher Outreach to Parents.** Teachers reach out more to communicate with and involve parents.

**Teacher-Parent Trust.** Teachers report a higher level of trust among teachers and parents.

## 3. School Environment/Culture

**Student Safety.** Students report that they are safer in and around school.

**Teacher Commitment to School.** Teachers have a stronger personal commitment to this particular school.




## 4. Staff Development and Collaboration

**Teacher Collaboration.** Teachers work together more collaboratively.

**Teacher Collective Responsibility.** Teachers express a stronger collective responsibility for the school's improvement.

**Innovation Encouraged.** Teachers feel more encouraged to try out new approaches.

**Shared Teacher Norms.** Teachers express more agreement about what is expected of students in terms of academics and behavior.

**Teacher-Teacher Trust.** Teachers feel more trust with fellow teachers.

**Teacher-Principal Trust.** Teachers trust the principal more.

**Reflective Dialogue Among Teachers.** Teachers are more likely to discuss and analyze their teaching and school-wide improvement.

## 5. Instructional Program

**Staff Priority on Student Learning.** Teachers report that the school places a stronger emphasis on improved student learning as the overriding school priority.

their students were reading at or above the national average, while by 1997, 37% of their students were at or above the national average.[44]

The researchers used teacher survey data from the Consortium on Chicago School Research to determine whether the Substantially Up Schools used **distinctively different practices** from the No Trend Schools. Twenty-seven Indicators of particular school practices had been created by the Consortium researchers. These Indicators were used in the Designs for Change study to identify **statistically significant differences in practices** between the Substantially Up and No Trend Schools.[45]

As reflected in Table 7 on page 10, **"Local School Council Contribution"** (as rated by teachers) was one of 14 Indicators of school practice on which Substantially Up Schools scored **significantly higher** than No Trend Schools. This result was statistically significant at less than the .014 level. (In other words, the odds were less than 14 in 1000 that this result occurred by chance.)

The Designs for Change study thus concludes that one distinctive feature of low-achieving schools that **significantly raised Iowa Reading Test achievement** between 1990 and 1997 is a **more effective Local School Council.**

Note that the Substantially Up Schools also had significantly more effective **principal leadership** and more **teacher involvement in decision making**. Thus, those elementary schools at which reading achievement rose substantially typically had strong leadership from the LSC, principal, and teachers. These findings contradict the viewpoint that school leadership is a **"win-lose" process**, in which, for example, the principal can be a strong leader only if the LSC and teachers have weak leadership roles. In fact, the study found that **"Cooperative Adult Effort"** among all the adults involved in the school was a powerful force for improving student achievement.[46]

## Results of Follow-Up Study

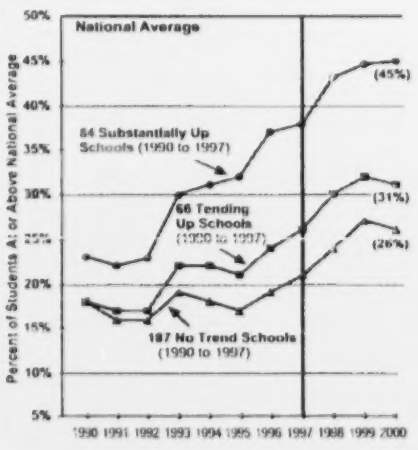
In a follow-up study to **What Makes These Schools Stand Out**, Designs for Change analyzed **the subsequent progress** of the Substantially Up Schools and No Trend Schools on the Iowa Reading Test for the period from **1997 through 2000.**[47]

The study also analyzed the patterns of Iowa Reading Test achievement of those schools that Chicago's School Board had **placed on "probation"** in fall 1996 and 1997. These probation schools had **lost much of their local decision-making ability**, and the LSCs at these schools were typically marginalized.

As reflected in Table 8, the elementary schools that were Substantially Up from 1990 to 1997 **continued to make impressive sustained gains** on the Iowa Reading Test. Although the Substantially Up Schools were, on average, 78% low-income, they had **45%** of their students reading at or above the national average by

*Elementary schools that substantially raised reading achievement had more effective leadership from three sources — the principal, the LSC, and teachers.*

**TABLE 8. Low-Achieving Chicago Elementary Schools with Local Initiative, Leadership, Teamwork, and Creativity Continued to Improve Iowa Reading Test Results from 1997 to 2000**




**Source**: Designs for Change





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spring 2000 — nearly reaching the national average of 50%.

In contrast, the schools placed on probation in fall 1996 and 1997 moved from about 10% at or above the national average to about **22%**, but then flattened out at this low level (see Table 9). They still had 78% of their students reading **below the national average**. A heavily punitive top-down effort at the center of the probation process **did not bring about sustained achievement gains**.

*A heavily punitive top-down approach has not brought about sustained achievement gains.*

The sustained gains that continued through spring 2000 in the elementary schools that were Substantially Up from 1990 through 1997 provide further evidence that Local School Council leadership, principal leadership, and teacher leadership must all be nurtured in schools that are going to improve their student achievement over the long term.

## Other Research Evidence

A great volume of additional research has been carried out about Chicago's Local School Councils, including participant observation studies in particular schools.[48] The brief selective review of some additional evidence about LSCs presented below focuses on recent **policy-relevant issues**:

- [] The LSC's Role in Principal Evaluation and Selection
- [] Candidate Turnout for LSC Elections
- [] Local School Council Corruption
- [] Local School Council Training

### The LSC's Role in Principal Evaluation and Selection

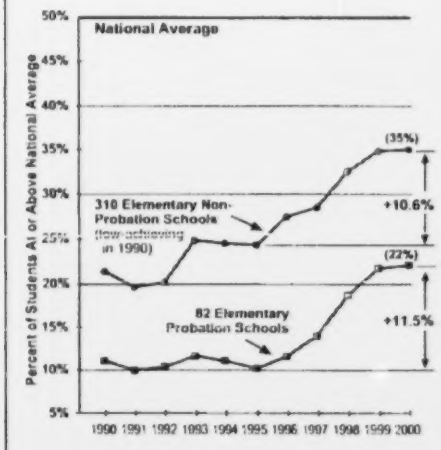
By December 1997, **83%** of those who were principals when the school reform law was passed in 1988 were **no longer principals**.[49] The current principal turnover percentage since 1988 **exceeds 90%**. The bulk of these changes resulted from **principal retirements or voluntary job changes**. However, in the first round of principal selections in spring 1990, **18%** of principals who sought a new contract were **not rehired** by their LSC.[50]

In contrast, the number of principals who applied and were not rehired by their LSCs had **dwindled to 3%** in spring 1999.[51] A state law that altered the principal evaluation and selection process, along with **aggressive action** in support of many sitting principals by Mayor Daley's school system leadership team, contributed to the fact that 97% of principals who sought a new contract were rehired by their LSCs in 1999.[52]

In spring 1996, the Mayor was able to secure a change in state law that allowed the Central Board to set standards for the hiring and on-going evaluation of principals.[53] This change in the law required that the central administration evaluate each principal annually, and that the LSC also conduct an annual evaluation, using a form approved by the Central Board.

At the end of the 1997-98 school year, the central administration gave **every principal in the system a satisfactory rating**,[54] and many principals used this satisfactory rating as the basis for asserting to their LSC that they should be rehired.

**TABLE 9. Iowa Reading Test Results of Low-Achieving Probation and Non-Probation Elementary Schools**




**Source**: Designs for Change





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Also, in a number of schools (such as Kennedy High School, Jahn Elementary School, and Stowe Elementary School), **central office staff campaigned** to have the contracts of sitting principals renewed, even though the LSC had clearly documented reasons for seeking a new principal.[55] For example, central office staff questioned why a principal who had received a satisfactory evaluation from the central administration was not being rehired, threatened teachers who served on LSCs with transfers, publicly announced that LSCs that proceeded with the process of selecting a new principal were "**under investigation**," and resisted approving the contracts that LSCs signed with new principals.[56] At Jahn Elementary School, for example, *Catalyst* magazine reported that:

> At one LSC meeting, before a crowd of parents protesting the decision [by the LSC not to renew the principal's contract], James Deanes, director of school and community relations, "got up and stood behind us and said 'We just want you to know that this council is under investigation, and we're going to be watching them very carefully from now on,'" Leaner [an LSC member] recalls. "This was the first we heard as a council that we were under investigation, and it was somewhat humiliating to be rebuked like that. It was just inappropriate, and we don't think it's defensible." Moreover, Deanes wouldn't reveal the details of the investigation, she says.[57]

In spring 1999, the school system's Chief Executive Officer mounted a **legislative campaign to eviscerate key LSC powers** (including the authority to select a principal), through amendments to State Senate Bill 652.[58] A key theme of this campaign was that many LSCs **were not competent** to choose their principal.[59] Although the Consortium study documenting the general effectiveness of LSCs had been released nearly two years earlier, CEO Paul Vallas made statements like the following:

- "It's not pretty, but there's some members of LSCs who are felons."[60]
- "We need a better quality of people on our councils ...I have homeless people serving on some of our councils."[61]

As a result of a vigorous campaign by Local School Council members and school reform groups, **none** of the provisions of the school system's proposed bill that struck at the heart of LSC authority (including principal selection authority) **were passed** as part of Senate Bill 652. However, the widely-publicized campaign to pass SB 652 made many LSC members feel that their efforts to improve their schools were being undermined and that they were being stereotyped as incompetent and corrupt.

The new school system leadership appointed in summer 2001 has stated that they wish to **stop interference** by central office staff in LSC decision making about principal evaluation and selection.

The expiration dates for principal contracts **cluster in two years of every four**. In the 2001-2002 school year, **159** contracts expire, while **170** expire in the 2002-2003 school year.[62] Designs for Change and other school reform and community groups are assisting LSCs whose principals' contracts are expiring to help them conduct more rigorous principal evaluations, consider the possibility of seeking a new principal, and navigate the process of principal selection.[63]

*Central office staff have pressed LSCs to renew the contracts of ineffective principals.*

## Candidate Turnout for LSC Elections

Presently, there are about 3,300 parent seats, 1,100 community seats, 1,100 teacher seats, and 70 student seats on Chicago's LSCs — a total of about **5,500 positions** for elected members.

In the initial 1989 LSC election, **nearly 17,000 adult candidates** ran for Chicago's LSCs — exceeding all expectations.

However, the candidate turnout **dropped substantially** in succeeding years, hovering in the range of 7,000 to 8,000 adult candidates:

- 1989: 16,639 candidates.
- 1991: 8,142 candidates.
- 1993: 7,361 candidates.



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*All available evidence indicates that corruption on Chicago's LSCs is rare.*

- 1996: 7,795 candidates.
- 1998: 7,093 candidates.
- 2000: 7,095 candidates.[64]

In the original 1989 election, **98%** of schools had **contested parent elections** (i.e., seven or more candidates were running for the six available seats).[65] In the 2000 election, **only 59% of schools had contested parent elections**, while 26% of schools had just enough candidates to fill the six parent seats, and 14% had fewer than six candidates.[66] (In schools with an insufficient number of candidates, those LSC members who are elected appoint others to fill council vacancies.) Not surprisingly, voter participation is significantly higher when an LSC election is contested.[67]

Several efforts have been made to boost the level of parent, community, and teacher candidacy. Beginning in 1996, the state legislature shifted the LSC election to Parent Report Card Pick-Up Day in the spring. Foundations and corporations have funded candidate recruitment efforts by community groups and school reform groups. However, a study of the spring 1996 election by the Chicago Urban League indicated that schools targeted by these outside groups achieved only tiny improvements in the number of candidates, compared with schools that were not targeted for special recruitment.[68]

Designs for Change has helped achieve a 90% rate of contested parent elections during the past four LSC elections in schools that the organization has targeted. This level of candidate participation was achieved by concentrating on direct one-on-one candidate recruitment at the school and at the homes of potential candidates (as opposed to distributing literature and speaking at public meetings).

If **9,000 to 10,000 adult candidates** can be recruited for an LSC election, this level of participation will be sufficient to ensure a contested race for the parent, community, and teacher seats in almost every school.

## Local School Council Corruption

Given the long tradition of government corruption in Chicago, one early speculation about Local School Councils was that they would become hundreds of **small pockets of patronage and corruption**. This prediction was based, in part, on New York City's experiment with Community School Boards (with each board serving about 25,000 students); a substantial number of Community School Board members have been convicted in connection with job-selling schemes and other illegal activities.[69]

The designers of the Chicago school reform plan argued that while some level of corruption was inevitable in any big city school system, bringing decision making down to parent majority councils at the school level would **make corruption less likely**, since Local School Councils with parent majorities would be motivated primarily by a desire to improve their own children's education. Further, reformers argued in 1988 that sitting on the council of a single school was **less attractive** to individuals who intended to engage in corrupt activities than (for example) serving on a Community School Board that governed 30 schools and controlled or influenced hiring for hundreds of jobs. Chicago's LSCs have direct authority to hire one person — the school's principal. And they are under strict conflict of interest rules about the hiring of relatives or business associates.

There are several different types of evidence indicating that corruption on Local School Councils is relatively rare:

- As noted on page 8, the Consortium study of LSCs found only **5%** of councils had two or more members who reported "unethical activity" on the part of LSC members.[70] Subsequent to the time that these data were collected, Chicago's LSCs were placed under the strictest **ethics and conflict of interest policy** of any elected officials in the state[71] — a policy containing provisions that such elected bodies as the Illinois General





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Assembly or the Chicago City Council have not imposed on themselves.

- In 1997, the *Chicago Sun-Times* launched an investigative series charging the Local School Council at Clemente High School had used the school's discretionary funds to bring controversial advocates of Puerto Rican independence to the school from Puerto Rico in the early 1990s and that a local alderman had received consulting payments from the school for work he had not performed.[72]

  The *Sun-Times* stories led to a year-long investigation by a special committee of the Illinois House of Representatives, as well as a criminal investigation by the Illinois State Police. At the end of its investigation, the legislative committee issued a report excoriating the behavior of the Clemente principal and LSC. However, the report also concluded that there was no evidence that other Chicago LSCs had engaged in similar behavior.[73] The committee concluded that almost all LSCs were spending state discretionary money appropriately for such purposes as reducing class size, hiring reading and math specialists, and purchasing computers.[74] In the end, the large-scale criminal investigation by the Illinois State Police did not result in any criminal indictments.

- In fact, no Local School Council member has **ever been convicted** for corrupt activity related to his or her role on a Chicago Local School Council, although about **12,000 Chicagoans** have served on LSCs. This record contrasts, for example, with the record of the Chicago City Council, with over **15%** of its members convicted of felonies since 1990.[75]

Undoubtedly, there is some level of corruption among Local School Councils. However, all the hard evidence available indicates that it exists in only a very small number of LSCs.

## Local School Council Training

New members of Chicago's LSCs are required by state law to participate in 18 hours of training. LSC members are the **only elected officials** in Illinois who are required to participate in training after winning elected public office.

In spring 1995, the legislature charged the Council of Deans of the area's schools of education with overseeing this training, with the University of Illinois at Chicago taking the lead role in the process. In the training effort that resulted, school reform groups, academics, and Chicago school system staff **collaborated** to spell out a basic curriculum for LSC training. Then, specific school system staff members, academics, and school reform group members were certified to teach this curriculum in both large group settings and to individual LSCs or cluster of LSCs.

In spring 1997, the Chicago school system leadership convinced the state legislature to **name the Chicago Board** as the key group responsible for providing the mandated LSC training. The Central Board then restricted outside participation in providing LSC training, and placed its primary emphasis on providing **large-scale** citywide or regional training sessions in school auditoriums.

The Chicago Board subsequently **loosened its grip** a little on the training process, and allowed independent groups to become certified to offer the entire 18 hours of training to individual LSCs or clusters of LSCs.

In addition to this mandated training, some independent groups provide additional education and assistance that reaches a modest proportion of LSCs. This help is typically aimed at helping LSCs at the point when they are about to carry out a major responsibility (such as developing a school budget or evaluating their principal).

When judged in light of best practices for effective adult education,[76] the training and assistance experienced by most LSC members is **inadequate** — for example, it is not tailored to the LSC's specific situation, not offered at the time when the LSC must carry out a specific responsibility, and not linked with follow-up help.

*LSC members are the only elected officials in Illinois required to participate in training, but most of this training is inadequate.*



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*The overall viability and accomplishment of Chicago's LSCs is clear cut. The issue is not whether they should exist, but how they can be strengthened.*

## Interpretive Summary: Setting the Highest Expectations for Chicago's Local School Councils

Reviewing the research about Chicago's Local School Councils justifies **two broad conclusions**:

- As the Consortium on Chicago School Research determined, "The vast majority of LSCs are viable governance organizations that responsibly carry out their mandated duties and are active in building school and community partnerships..." The **overall level of viability and accomplishment** of Chicago's LSCs is so clearly established that the issue is not whether they should exist, but how they can be **further strengthened.**
- When judged against the standards set by the most effective LSCs, the impact of a large percentage of LSCs on educational quality and student achievement can be **dramatically strengthened**. Further, while the need for improvement is clear cut, the path to making these needed improvements is also clear cut and feasible.

### The Documented Strengths of Chicago's LSCs

The research evidence about Chicago's Local School Councils **contradicts the stereotypes** that continue to dog the LSCs. Chicago's LSCs have been scrutinized in a way that other elected public officials in the state (including local school boards) have never been.

The LSCs' overall level of viability and accomplishment is clearly established by the research that has resulted from this scrutiny. Among the **positive findings** of this research are the following:

- LSC members typically have **good educational backgrounds** — they are significantly better educated than the average Illinois resident.
- The **typical LSC** meets at least monthly, nearly always has a quorum, and has two or more active committees. Parent and community LSC members devote an average of **28 hours per month** to helping their school.
- The **clear majority** of Local School Councils are carrying out their key duties of principal evaluation, principal, selection, school improvement planning, and school budget development effectively. 50%-60% of LSCs are characterized by Consortium researchers as "**high functioning**."
- One of the distinctive characteristics of elementary schools that were low-achieving in 1990, but made sustained reading test score gains over the next decade, is that these successful schools had an **effective LSC**, as judged by the school's teachers. In general, those elementary schools that have shown major improvements in student achievement have been characterized by school-level initiative on the part of the principal, teachers, and the LSC. Low-achieving elementary schools that were taken over by the central administration in the late 1990s made very limited achievement gains.
- Many LSCs have helped **build collaborative partnerships** between the school and other community resources.
- LSCs comprise the vast majority of **African American and Latino elected officials** in Illinois. LSC members strengthen these skills for civic participation through the experience of serving on their LSC.
- In a city that is notorious for its political corruption, all objective evidence points to the fact that **very few LSC members** use their office to engage in **corrupt activity**.

### Overcoming Weaknesses and Expecting Much More

Based on the positive results summarized above, it is time to put in place a set of **dramatically higher expectations** on LSCs, along with a **support system** that





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enables LSCs to meet these high expectations.

Among the **key negative findings** about LSCs that are documented by the research and must be overcome through further change are the following:

- About **10%-15%** of LSCs are enmeshed in sustained conflict, are inactive, or have engaged in unethical behavior.
- **25%-33%** of LSCs are "performing well but need support." They are fulfilling their basic legal duties, but are not proactive in providing leadership to their school. Such LSCs are **unlikely to contribute significantly** to making fundamental improvements in student learning.
- Among the 50%-60% of LSCs that the Consortium characterized as "highly functioning" and proactive, about **15%-20%** consistently scored at the **very highest levels** on the Consortium's rating scales (i.e., all LSC members strongly agreed that all desirable practices were being carried out for each critical LSC activity — such as school improvement planning). Thus, among the highly functioning LSCs identified by the Consortium study, there is **still room for significant improvement** in a substantial portion of them, if they are judged by the most rigorous standards.
- About 50% of elementary schools showed substantial improvement on the Iowa Reading Test from 1990 to 2000, or maintained scores above the national average.[77] One reasonable standard for judging LSC effectiveness over time is to **look at the bottom line of test score achievement**.
- There was no significant improvement between 1990 and 2000 in student achievement or in dropout rates in **Chicago's high schools**, once changes in the nature of the students entering high school were taken into account.[78] Chicago's high school LSCs must move to a **new level of effectiveness** if they are to help solve this complex problem.

To increase the level of accomplishment and potential that the research about Chicago's Local School Councils has documented, a number of steps must be taken to change the way that LSC members are **currently treated and educated**:

- From the earliest stages of the 1988 school reform, the school system's Central Board and central office staff have attempted to **interfere inappropriately in LSC decision making** (for example, by pressing LSCs to hire or rehire favored principal candidates). This interference has **increased dramatically** since 1995. It is essential for pressure to be brought to bear from the top school system leadership and through political action **to stop** this type of interference.
- As noted earlier, LSC "training" frequently **fails to meet key standards for effective adult education**, such as providing educational experiences at the point when the LSC is actually carrying out a key responsibility, analyzing the LSC's concrete situation as an integral part of the educational process, and following up formal sessions with "over-the-shoulder" assistance.[79] Providing such educational experiences to a significant number of LSCs will require a **major financial investment** (or redeployment of resources) and the **development of an infrastructure** capable of providing this education that currently **does not exist**. To be effective, this support effort must be independent of Chicago's Central Board and administration. A **major resource** in developing this infrastructure are current and former LSC members in schools with **exemplary LSC leadership**.
- Educational experiences for LSC members typically place a heavy focus on the specifics of carrying out legally-mandated responsibilities and fail to focus sufficiently on the actions that LSCs can take to **improve educational quality and student achievement** as they exercise these responsibilities.[80] For each of the Five Essential Supports for Learning indicated in Table 7 on page 10, the implications for LSC knowledge and effective action can be readily spelled out. For example, in evaluating princi-

*Providing high quality education and assistance that reaches most LSCs will require developing an infrastructure that does not currently exist.*





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*LSC education must place a major focus on helping LSCs solve educational quality issues.*

pals, LSCs can obtain and examine data about the number of teachers in their school who are not fully certified and the steps that the principal has taken and can take to solve this problem. The new infrastructure for educating and assisting LSCs must place a major focus on helping LSC solve these educational quality issues.

- It is unlikely that the changes in the education of LSCs described above will occur or that the central administration will end its interference in LSCs' efforts to improve their schools unless more LSC members **become skilled advocates** capable of impacting systemwide and state policy. Thus, an essential objective for improving the education of LSCs should be to prepare more LSC members as effective advocates for policy change.

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